

STORIES OF 63 SAINTS OF SOUTH INDIA



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Book 8

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The Stories of this Book
SUNDARAMURTHI NAYANAR
SEKKIZHAR AUTHOR OF
PERIYAPURANAM



Book 8

SUNDARAMURTHI NAYANAR

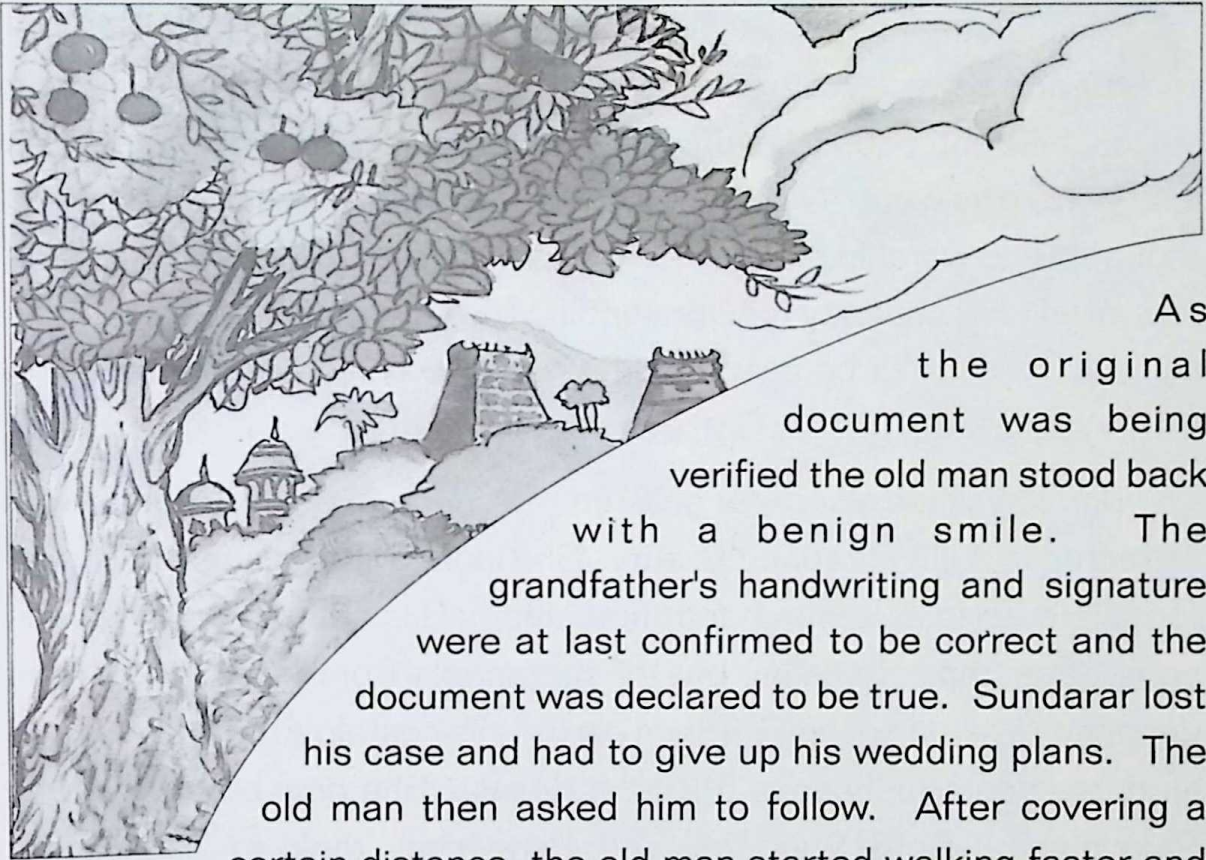
Sundaramurthi Nayanar was amongst the more famous and powerful of Nayanars. He was born at Tiru Navalur, which is in the South Arcot District of today. His father was Sadaianar (another Nayanar) and mother Isai Jnaniar, both great devotees of Lord Thyagaraja (Siva). They often visited Arur and prayed to Lord Siva to grant them a divine child. After such prayers was born Nambi Arurar (named after the holy place Arur) or Sundaramurthi as he was more famously known. The child was so fair, charming and bright that everyone was enamoured of him. One day, as the child was playing with a toy in the courtyard, King Narasinga Munaiyar, who was passing that way, saw him. He was so attracted to the child, that he requested the parents to leave him under his foster care. The parents agreed and the king adopted him as his own child. The boy grew up in princely luxury and was taught all the scriptures. He became a pious man, who looked like a prince but lived like a sage. He was still unaware of his mission in life, a mission that the God himself had chalked out for him. When he grew old enough to be married, his parents tried to find a suitable bride.

A lovely girl, daughter of Sadangavi Sivacharya of Puttur, was chosen as his bride. Grand arrangements began, the palace and the town started to get ready for the royal wedding. Nambi Arurar was dressed for the occasion and brought to the bridal house in a ceremonial procession on a white horse followed by the elite of Navalur. With music bands, trumpets and fire works the groom was



received at the bride's residence. Amongst all this splendour, Sundarar forgot his mission. To rid him of this delusion about marriage and awaken him to the all important purpose for which he was destined, the Lord put an impediment for the marriage. As the bridegroom stood resplendent in silk and jewels, priests were chanting the holy verses, flowers were being showered as the bride came to take her place beside him. There was a frenzy of delight and joy in the proceedings but God alone remembered that destiny had to intervene. Just as the wedding was going to be solemnised, an old man came on the scene and interrupted.

All those assembled looked at him in surprise. He was old and his forehead was smeared with holy ashes; he had greying hair and rings in his ears, and beads around his neck. He was leaning on a staff and he stopped the ceremony saying he had a dispute to settle with Nambi Arurar, the groom. The prince had never set eyes on the man before and got angry. He demanded to know what the dispute was about. The old man then opened a document in which was written that the prince's grandfather had pledged that he and his progeny would serve as slaves of the old man. The prince tore the document in fury. But the old man just laughed and said that everyone present could call him insane if they pleased but the original document was still safe with him. It was then decided by all elders that the village council would be approached at Tiru Vennai Nallur for advice and guidance. While this drama was being enacted, Nambi Arurar started to admire the pluck of the old man and began to have a subtle liking for the obstinacy.



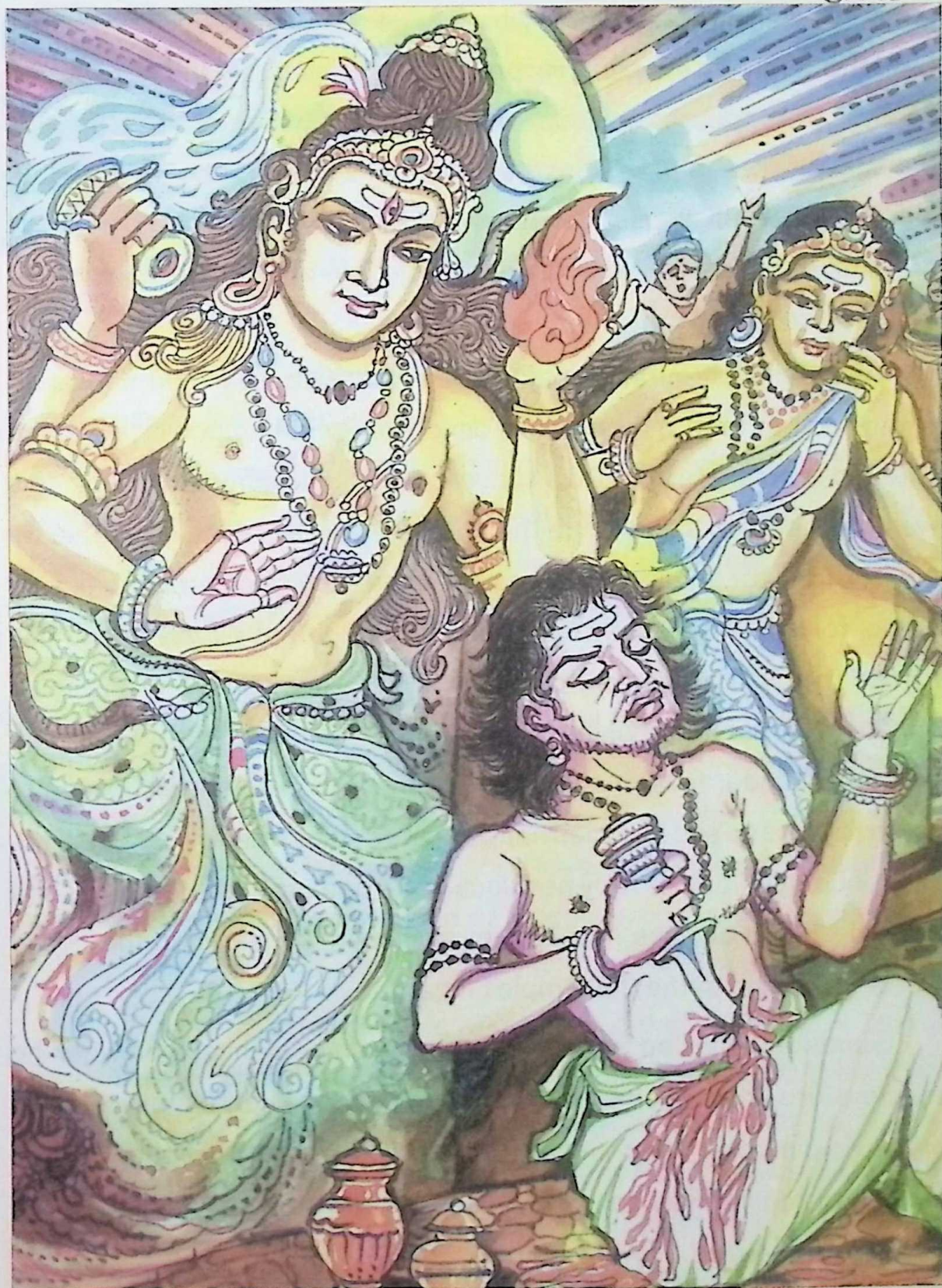
As the original document was being verified the old man stood back with a benign smile. The grandfather's handwriting and signature were at last confirmed to be correct and the document was declared to be true. Sundarar lost his case and had to give up his wedding plans. The old man then asked him to follow. After covering a certain distance, the old man started walking faster and faster towards the temple. The staff in his hand was not needed and he had the gait of a young man. Sundarar tried to keep pace with him. As the old man reached the temple sanctum he went inside and just disappeared. Sundarar reached inside and was enveloped by a divine force. To his wonder and astonishment, in a burst of luminous light he saw Siva and Uma ascend into the heavens, riding a bull. He fell on his knees and his ecstasy knew no bounds. He fully understood the reason for this strange incident in his life. The truth and reality of his mission on earth was fully revealed. He begged forgiveness for his high handed attitude and rudeness. The Lord then bade him to begin the work he was sent for, that is, spread the message of Saivism, sing in praise of the Lord and travel from place to place helping those devotees who needed it.

Thus began a journey which went from Chidambaram to Sirkazhi to Arur and so on. Wherever he set foot his melodious and arousing voice brought people in droves. He received rousing receptions everywhere he went. Now his mind, body and soul were steeped in the thoughts and worship of Siva. He composed a new song in every place he visited. His capacity for worshipping the God knew no parallel. His spiritual bliss could be seen by all those who came into contact with him. People knew he was God's companion sent to earth.

One day when Sundarar entered the sanctum of Tiru Arur he was attracted to a girl of radiant beauty. She looked like an angel in human form. He fell in love with her at first sight. This beautiful damsel was none other than Kamalini, one of the angels from heaven who was destined to be one of his wives on earth. His nostalgic musing revoked all these beautiful images of her in Kailas. She now bore the name Paravaiyar. Both Sundarar and Paravaiyar took to each other instantly. Praying to God to unite them in marriage, they bowed their heads.

Lord Siva Himself directed the priests of the temple in Tiru Arur to conduct the wedding ceremony in grandeur. The couple lived a life of peace and contentment. They continued with their work of spreading the message of God. Their earthly needs had to be satisfied though - food, shelter and clothing. This work the God entrusted to an old honest tiller of the land named Kundaiyur.

Kundaiyur, a devotee of Siva, looked up to Sundarar and his wife as God's children. He took great care of them; they never bothered about their needs as their thoughts were filled with their mission to sing about Siva. One year there was famine and hunger spread in the



land. Kundaiyur did not know where to go for the means with which to feed the saint and his wife. He prayed and prayed for God to show him a way. God appeared in his vision and directed him to go to the front of his house. Heaps of grain were lying there to feed the saint and his wife and for all those devotees of Siva, who needed His help. Miraculously the grain was found in the houses of all those people, who sought God's help!

Another such miracle took place when Paravayar had no means with which to feed thousands of devotees, who had come to Arur to listen to Sundarar singing in a concert held during summer. Since gold was the medium of exchange then, Paravaiyar prayed to God Siva for help. Sundarar lay down in a nearby monastery taking rest. He used bricks for a pillow. When he awoke he found that all the bricks had turned to gold! Paravaiyar's prayers had been answered and she could conduct the summer concert in a grand style with the gold given by Siva. As Sundarar went about his Divine mission devotees flocked to listen to him and see miracles happen before their very eyes. Once the king of Uraiur lost his ruby necklace while bathing in the Cauvery. He prayed to God and the necklace miraculously appeared in the pot of water he took to bathe the temple Lingam.

Sundarar travelled from Arur to Kanchi and Kalahasti and when he reached Tiru Vottriyur, his life was going to enter a new chapter. In this little temple town lived Sangiliar, daughter of Inaiyar Kizhar, a rich farmer. Sangiliar was non other than Aninditai, the second angel with whom he had fallen in love in Kailas.

At Tiru Vottriyur people held a grand reception for Sundarar. He entered the temple of Thyagaraja and sang in devotional fervour. Sangiliar lived alone in a home for single girls and refused to marry anyone whom her parents had chosen for her. She only wanted a saint of Siva as her husband. She carried out similar duties of making garlands of flowers for the idol of Goddess Uma as she had done in her heavenly abode.

One day as she was threading the flowers in a room adjacent to the temple sanctum, she saw saint Sundarar entering the temple. Both their eyes met at the same instant and knew they were meant for each other. Sangiliai knew of his first marriage, so she put a condition before God for marrying the saint. She wanted the saint's assurance never to desert her if he married her. God asked Sundarar to agree to the condition.

According to God's direction Sundarar took care to take this vow of constancy outside the temple shrine under a holy tree so that it would be binding him forever. Thus began a new life for Sundarar and Sangiliar. Sundarar had no libidinous love for his wives. Theirs was a psychic love leading to the love of God in every soul they came into contact with.

But Sundarar often thought about the Lord at Arur and of his wife Paravaiyar, whom he had left behind. He wanted to attend the summer concert festival that was held every year at Arur and could even visualize the heavenly dancing of Paravaiyar when he sang for the God. This inner urge could not be contained and he began his journey towards Arur. At the outskirts of the town as he entered, he lost his vision!

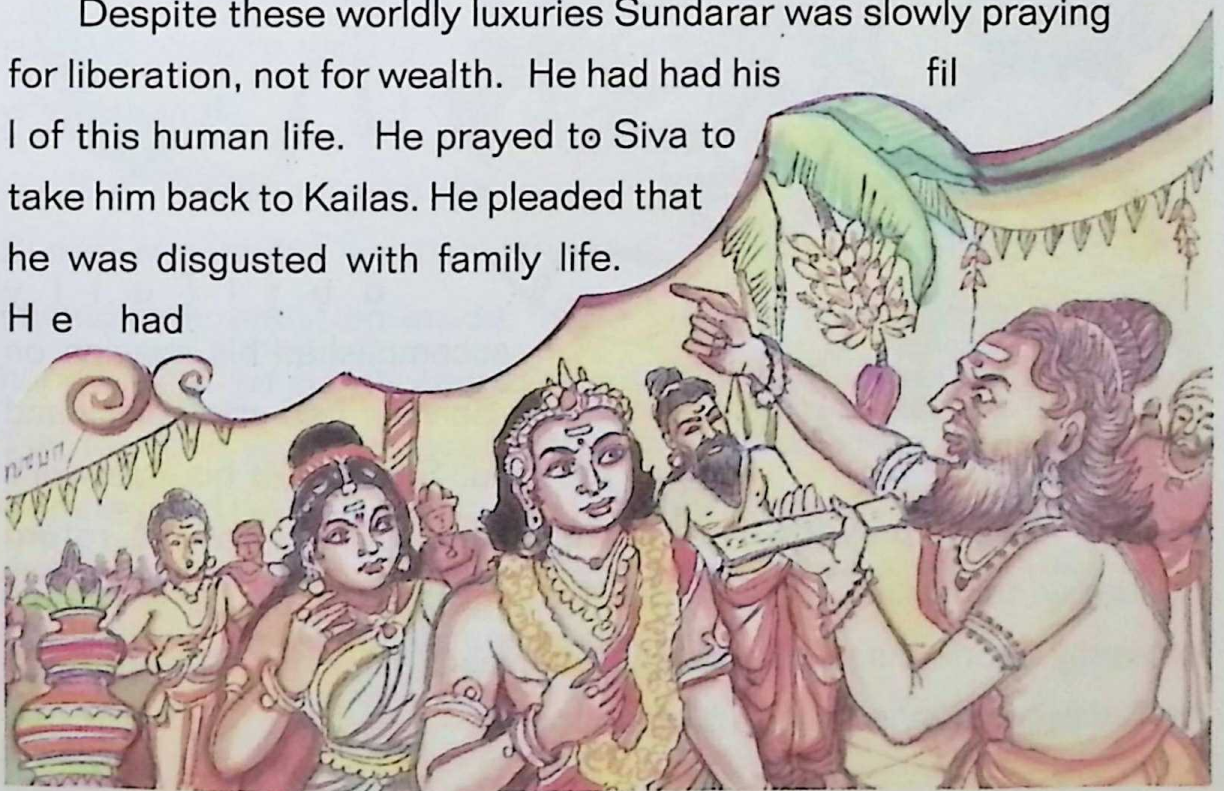
This was the punishment meted out to him for having breached his vow given to Sangitai never to desert her. But this would not stop him from continuing on his way; he stumbled from one temple to the other singing prayers, pathetically pleading for pardon from the God. At last Siva took pity on him and opened one of his eyes. As he neared Tiru Arur, the spiritual atmosphere of the temple enveloped him. He was cheered by his followers as soon as he set foot inside the temple precincts. God, out of compassion, opened his other eye also and now he had perfect vision!

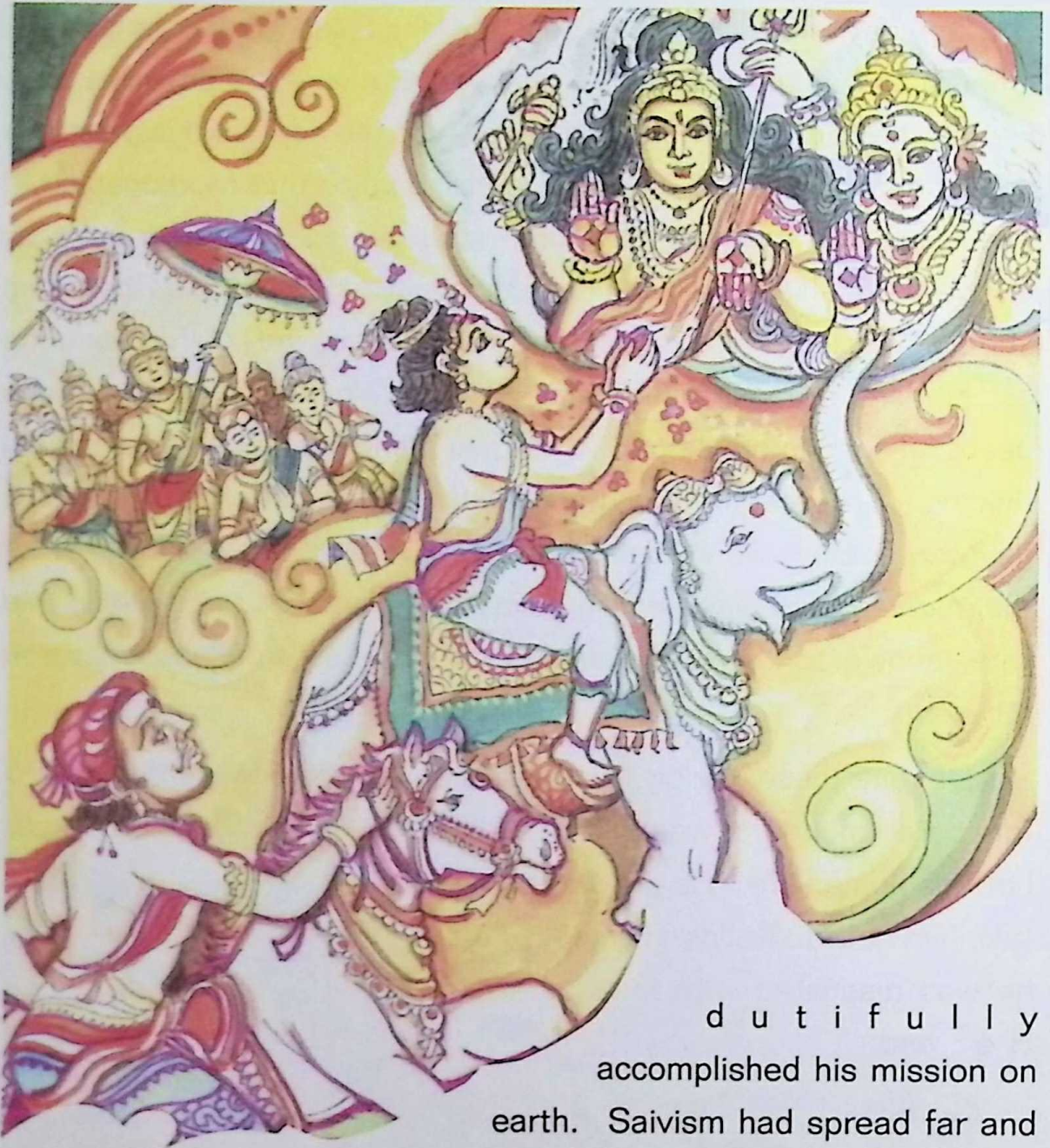
But his next hurdle turned out to be his first wife Paravaiyar. She was very upset at being betrayed by Sundarar in marrying a second time. She was very indignant and would not even allow his followers to enter her home. For a very long time she sulked and feigned disdain. But in her heart she did have a special place for her husband. Sundarar pleaded with the God to come to his help. God tried to reason out with her and only when Siva appeared before her in His glorious form did she relent. She fell at Siva's feet and agreed to all He asked of her. She then received her husband with love and reverence.

In the years to follow, Sundarar met a very valued friend. There lies a tale behind this eventful meeting of two great souls who became lifelong friends. Cheraman Perumal was a king who had the distinction of being able to read the thoughts of animals too! He was so dedicated to Siva that at the end of his daily morning puja, Siva blessed him with the tinkling sound of anklets; Siva in the dancing form of Nataraja wears anklets on his feet.

One day as usual after his puja, the king failed to hear the anklets. Cheraman was so upset that he removed his dagger to commit suicide. He felt that Siva no longer was happy with the depth of his devotion. Just then he heard the anklets and also a voice that accompanied it! The voice told him that the Lord was listening to a song sung by Sundarar in Chidambaram, hence the delay. Hearing this Cheraman immediately left for Chidambaram. After hearing the soulful rendering of Sundarar's songs, Cheraman Perumal himself burst out into a beautiful song in praise of Siva. When it ended he heard the anklets tinkling. Thus began a long and fruitful friendship of two true Siva devotees. Both were poet-singers and were united in their soul for their search of Siva. The king gave regal treatment to his friend and wife, showered them with gold, silk and even built a beautiful mansion for them.

Despite these worldly luxuries Sundarar was slowly praying for liberation, not for wealth. He had had his fill of this human life. He prayed to Siva to take him back to Kailas. He pleaded that he was disgusted with family life. He had





d u t i f u l l y
 accomplished his mission on
 earth. Saivism had spread far and
 wide in the land. Siva heard his follower's
 fervent prayers. He sent a white elephant for his return
 journey to Kailas. When Sundarar got ready to leave for his
 heavenly abode, he was all of eighteen years only! In such a short life
 he had accomplished such a divine mission.

The temple priests stood by as Sundarar mounted the white elephant. All of them were in awe at witnessing such a miracle right before their eyes. Coincidentally at the very same minute Cheraman was bathing in the village tank. He heard about his friend's departure and jumped on to his horse. He was just in time to see the white elephant ascending into the skies. He immediately chanted the 'Namah Sivaya' mantra into the ears of the horse, which helped it take off along with the celestial elephant. They somehow kept pace with the divine animal.

When they reached the gates of Kailas, Sundarar was immediately admitted into the presence of Siva. He thanked God for liberating him from his human existence. He was so grateful to God for helping him in times of stress and overcoming all his difficulties. In doing so, Siva had shown to all mankind that the Lord would always help those who wanted to take the correct path, get away from evil influences or wrong doings.

But Cheraman was still standing outside the gates of Kailas. Sundarar pleaded on behalf of his friend. Cheraman too was immediately admitted inside. Siva blessed both of them. He was happy with their saintly endeavours and in recognition of this, He said that mankind would always remember them and sing the songs that were penned by them. Paravai and Sangili also returned to Kailas and resumed their places as Aninditai and Kamalini to serve Goddess Uma in gathering flowers for her adornment.

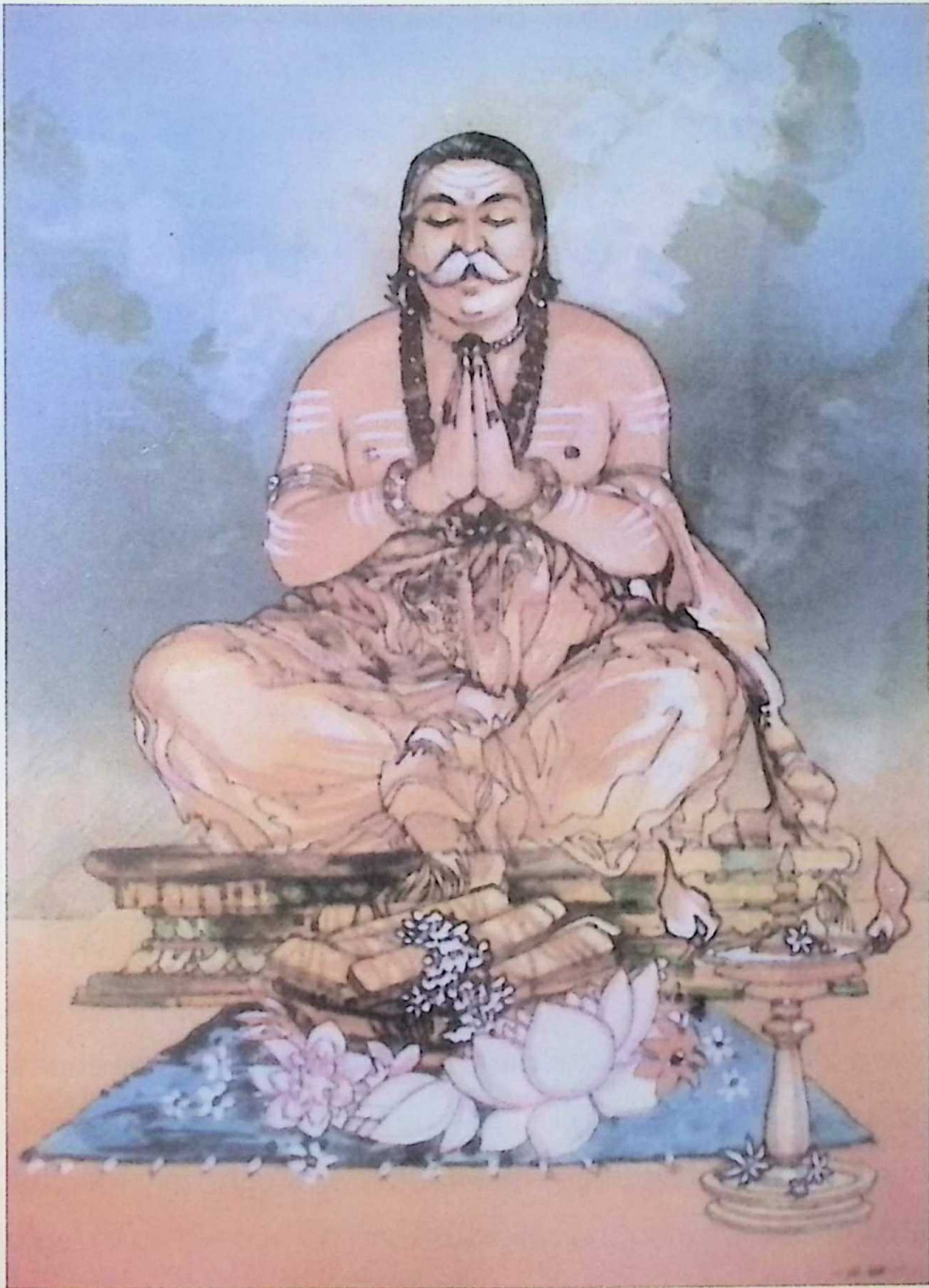
SEKKIZHAR

AUTHOR OF PERIYAPURANAM

Periyapuram narrates the life and deeds of the 63 Nayanars (Saivite saints) of Tamil Nadu, who dedicated their lives to the service of Lord Siva and his devotees. It was written by Sekkizhar, born in Kunrathur near Chennai (Madras). Even today there is a temple dedicated to him at Kunrathur. He was the chief minister with king Anabhaya Chola. There are different opinions about when he lived. The two main ones are 1113-1150 AD or 1178-1218 AD during the reigns of Kulothunga Chola II and Kulothunga Chola III. But most scholars accept him to have lived during the reign of Anabaya Kulothunga Chola II.

At that time the Chola kingdom was extremely rich and people had everything they needed in plenty, so that they seemed to have lost interest in spirituality and were after pleasure all the time. Sekkizhar felt that this should not be allowed to go on. To lead people into the path of devotion and service, Sekkizhar thought the best way would be to write about such service-minded persons and make them role models for people to follow. As he was then deeply engrossed in the study of Thevaram and other verses composed by the Saivite saints, he decided to write the history of the saints to turn the minds of the people to more profound things in life. He based his writing on "Thiruthondathogai" written by Nambi Aroorar. By praying to god and serving others, one would automatically get rid of selfishness.

As the saints he chose to write about were not fictional characters, he decided to compose his epic as a historical one. He gathered as much information as he could about the saints. The common factor about the life histories of all the 63 saints was that



they were all service-minded and events which occurred because of that quality; though they lived with their families, they were never concerned about their own mental satisfaction or physical

comfort; he decided to make this selflessness the core idea of his book. The greatness of Sekkizhar's work is that instead of a person, he made a characteristic the main theme of his epic.

Sekkizhar has made a statement that he was composing the epic with the aid and command of the Lord himself. However, he could not defy the traditions of the time. But still he began his story in a different way than that existed then. He began the story of Sundarar from the middle, which was known as Rusi Medi in western countries. It was Sekkizhar who introduced this system in this country. Another different thing he did was to avoid completely talking about kings and wars or any deeds connected with valour. Kings do play a role in the stories, but nothing about their royal life is described anywhere in the stories. These kings were also great devotees of the Lord and fulfilled their duties efficiently, without thinking about personal gains.

Sekkizhar's 'Periyapuramam' reveals the social conditions of those days. He had travelled through entire Tamil Nadu studying edicts, records of kings and the citizens etc. Therefore what he writes about the society can be taken as the social history of the times when the saints lived. As he himself was the chief minister, his awareness of the land and its people, their way of life, and how they were ruled was very clearly revealed in his writings. He handles very carefully the caste and class differences, as also the religious animosities which existed then. He made it clear in his epic that whichever profession one followed, whatever might be his social status, if he lived with lofty ideals and objectives, anyone could achieve greatness, which could eventually have an impact on the lives of others around him.

Glossary

1. Agama - knowledge based on the essence of vedic concepts pertaining to various aspects of learning; e.g. sculpture, architecture etc.
2. Asti - Nasti : Asti - it is (exist); Nasti - does not exist
3. Baktha - devotee
4. Brahamacharyam - student-hood, first stage of life
5. Brahmin - One who has knowledge of Brahman; a person belonging to one of the four social divisions, whose duty is to study, teach and perpetrate the Vedas.
6. Buddhist - follower of the philosophy preached by Buddha.
7. Jain - a member of Jainism, a religion branched out of Hinduism.
8. Karma - cause and effect of accumulation of past actions
9. Lingam- Phallic symbol of Lord Siva,
10. Mantra - words in praise of the gods, chanted in prayer.
11. Mutt - Monastery
12. Nayanar- Saintly devotee of Siva
13. Pooja - ritual worship
14. Saivism - Doctrine that talks about Siva
15. Saivite - follower of Saivism
16. Vazhga Andanar : Vazhga - Long live
 Andanar - Tamil term for Brahmin.
17. Veda - recalled scripture, a body of knowledge that reveals different means and ends to a human being.
18. Vedic - of Veda
19. Veena - a stringed music instrument of South India.
20. Venba - name of a Tamil poetic metre like Nalavenba.



STORIES OF 63 SAINTS OF SOUTH INDIA

The Periyapuranam, delineating the lives of the 63 famous Saivite saints of Tamil Nadu, known popularly as the "Arupathumoonru Nayanmar," was written by Sekkizhar, a wise chief minister of the Chola kingdom. Since then these stories have been narrated by countless generations of scholars in the temples of Tamil Nadu, and retold in both Tamil and English.

The devotion of these saints to Lord Siva was all encompassing. They were prepared to sacrifice not only their material wealth but even their lives and those of their families in the service of the Lord and His devotees. The numerous verses composed by the 63 saints in praise of Lord Siva in the various temples of Tamil Nadu have stood the test of time. The life histories of these saints serve as a role model to young people, and speak of the importance of devotion to duty and commitment to society.

The present stories have been retold in simple English for the benefit of young readers in India and abroad by Kalpana Ramani, Asha Kannan and Bhama Chandran, and edited by Lakshmi Venkatraman. Every story is brought to life in the evocative illustrations of Subha. This book is the first in a series of eight volumes envisaged by the Koviloor Adinam Children's Book Trust.

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